

## Are you ready for Volunteers?

*If you want volunteers to be an important part of your organization's future, articulate a positive vision of volunteer involvement for the organization to follow. ---Susan J. Ellis*

Many nonprofit boards automatically assume involving volunteers is the right thing to do. Often their reasoning for recruiting volunteers is simply a lack of funds. This is not a bad reason, but it should not be the only reason. Volunteers should not merely fill in the gaps until more money can be raised to hire and pay staff

## PREPARING FOR VOLUNTEERS

As a board, you should ask yourselves several basic questions about volunteer services. Each organization has unique needs that can affect the type of volunteers you recruit. By answering some fundamental questions, boards can better prepare for volunteers and reassess their volunteer needs. Nothing turns a volunteer off more than poor use of their time and skills. If a volunteer comes into your organization and feels there is no clear vision and policy for volunteers, disenchantment will soon follow and the volunteer is not as likely to remain in your organization. On the other hand, when a volunteer senses that the volunteer program has been integrated into the overall organizational strategic plan, the volunteer feels needed and supported.

Because most board members are volunteers, often little thought is given to preparing for additional volunteers within the organization. The bylaws within an organization usually provide the policy for board members who are volunteers which is not always the case with a general volunteer program. Creating policy is not only advisable from a

risk management perspective, but can articulate the importance of volunteers and contribute to volunteer satisfaction.

If you are a new organization, take a minute and go over the following list of questions before initiating a volunteer program. If you already have volunteers, asking these questions during your planning sessions or at a yearly board meeting assures continuous reassessment and improvement of your volunteer program.

## Questions to Consider before Volunteer Recruitment

1. What are the main reasons we want volunteers?
2. Are the board and staff prepared to welcome new people with different ideas?
3. Do we have adequate board committee chairs or staff members in place to support and administer volunteer programs? Are they committed and able to run the volunteer programs?
4. Do we know how our volunteers will be used within the organization?
5. Do our stakeholders share a common vision for our volunteer program?
6. Will the volunteers we recruit provide the best possible service to our constituency and staff?
7. Do we have policies in place for volunteer involvement? If not, what policies are needed?
8. Are we willing to integrate volunteer planning into the organization's strategic planning process? Do we want to have volunteers represented at these meetings?
9. Are we ready to consider appropriate volunteer budget support?

If your board can affirmatively answer each of these questions, explore the issues and implement necessary policy for your volunteer vision, you will be better prepared to offer your volunteers the roles that will be fulfilling and will engender personal commitment to your organization.

## ARTICULATE YOUR VOLUNTEER PHILOSOPHY

Once you have initiated policy that answers the issues and questions concerning volunteers, you need to assure that volunteers will feel part of your organization and have the same values or goals. One of the best ways to let your volunteers know that they are part of your organization's mission is to articulate a value statement about your volunteers. This can be done in a vision/philosophy statement or within the bylaws of your organization as part of the guidelines for volunteers. Consider the following examples as possible ways to do this:

The achievement of the goals of this agency is best served by the active participation of citizens of the community. To this end, the agency accepts and encourages the involvement of volunteers at all levels of ; the agency and within all appropriate programs and activities ...Steve McCurley

*....Our organization encourages the spirit of volunteerism and recognizes the value of our volunteers. Volunteers contribute their time, skills, and knowledge to further the mission of our organization. Volunteers also provide an important link to our community and assist us in fostering greater cultural awareness.*

....Anna Boulton

*Volunteer participation within the Institute is a strong and vital tradition, and the institute programs could not continue without the contributions and personal involvement of devoted volunteers. The staff should be supportive of volunteers, receive them as fellow workers, and willingly provide appropriate training and opportunity for their intellectual enrichment.*

Detroit Institute of Arts  
Sample Guidelines

## POLICIES FOR YOUR VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

There are many good reasons to establish policies or guidelines for your volunteer program. An ideal location for these policies is in your bylaws. Bylaws are flexible and can evolve with the organization in response to internal and external influences. Policies clarify responsibilities and define lines of communication and accountability. They are also an important part of your organization's risk management.

One of the key benefits of having a volunteer policy in place is to insure continuity as the organization experiences turnover. This sense of continuity contributes greatly to a volunteer's satisfaction since often it is the volunteers who stay with the organization for years and have to deal with the changes that occur over time.

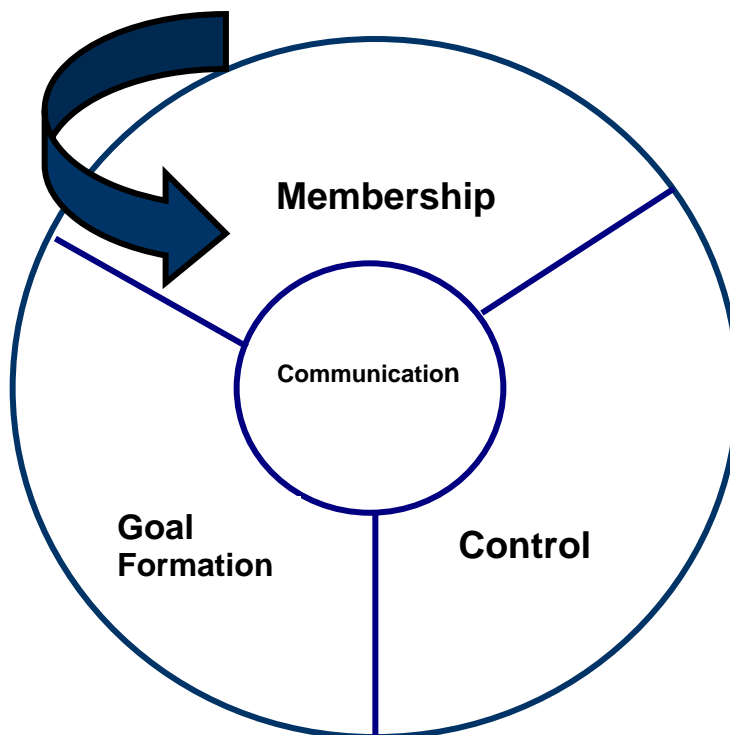
## THE GROUP CYCLE

One way to visualize why purpose/vision statements and volunteer policies are an important benefit to your volunteer program is to understand the group cycle. As a model, the group cycle is also helpful in other aspects of volunteer development and will be referred to throughout this handbook.

This model was originally created by Jack Gibb<sup>1</sup> to explain the three major elements of effective team building. This model was further developed by Kathleen Dannemiller<sup>2</sup> by the addition of a communication center which is the key component of effective teambuilding. (Refer to figure below)

The group cycle describes the different elements members of a group go through in any teambuilding situation. The cycle is also applicable to the issues a volunteer deals with when joining an organization. By understanding this cycle, volunteer administrators can help a new volunteer adjust and feel more satisfied within the group.

## The Group Cycle



**Membership:** When volunteer first enters the organization, the first issues he or she encounters concern acceptance into the group. Answers to questions such as: Will I fit in? Will others like me? Am I comfortable with this group? and Do I fit in here? are of utmost importance to the volunteer. Acceptance will increase when the volunteer feels it is safe to honestly voice feelings, values and beliefs.

**Control:** As soon as membership issues are explored and the volunteer is feeling more comfortable and accepted, concerns about control begin to surface. At this stage the volunteer begins to explore questions such as: Who do I report to? What are the organizations policies and procedures? Who has the most influence within the group? and What will my role be? These issues are directly related with how the group is going to work together and the various positions of influence within the group.

**Goal Formation:** When the volunteer feels that the membership and control issues are being addressed, attention will begin to shift toward the objectives and goals of the group. The integration of the volunteer's goals into the group's goals becomes a core issue at this stage of the cycle. If you recall groups you have belonged to in the past, you will be able to identify these three elements of working with others. You will

also be able to easily remember groups where you have felt disoriented and unaccepted due to not having your membership needs met. Some people never feel confident enough within a group to honestly express their opinions.

When an organization takes the time to address the incoming volunteer's membership and control needs, the volunteer is more likely to be able to contribute to the overall goals of the organization. Overall volunteer policy, vision, and role definition facilitate the volunteer's process through the group cycle and help define control issues.

**Communication:** Most important to this cycle is the center circle of communication<sup>3</sup>. Every element of the cycle is dependent on communication between members of the group. Acceptance is often communicated not only by a verbal welcome to the group and initial orientation to the organization, but also through nonverbal means such as body gestures, office environment and the general attitude of others about the volunteer's role in the organization. This is one of the reasons having a volunteer philosophy is important.

Communicating roles and authority issues greatly influences the volunteer's perceptions in the control phase of the group cycle. If roles are clearly defined and volunteers understand who they go to for job assignments and questions, misunderstandings are less likely to occur. During this phase of the cycle, the amount of flexibility and scope within the specific volunteer roles is also communicated.

As the volunteers discover these elements of the group, they can determine if the goals of the organization are congruous with their own personal goals. Also, through communication, the group members can not only align their personal goals with mission of the organization, but they can also integrate the various individual goals and create a sense of ownership within the organization.

In order to emphasize the importance of planning appropriate communication needs within each element of the group cycle, a planning chart that can be adapted to your organization follows. Consider ways to creatively meet the needs of each phase of the group cycle. Since many of the issues a new volunteer faces when joining an organization are serendipitous and often unpredictable, it is even more important to communicate acceptance through careful preparation and planning.

## Group Cycle Planning Guide

Membership	Control	Goal Formation
Plan social events to welcome new volunteers in a non-threatening environment Build brief “get to know you” activities into meetings.	Articulate your volunteer philosophy/vision and have a copy in the orientation packet.	Involve as many volunteers as possible or a spokesperson for the volunteers in planning sessions.
Give each volunteer an orientation packet with information about the organization and its members.	Include volunteer guidelines in orientation packet. Explain group norms to new volunteers. Solicit their input about norms.	LISTEN to volunteer suggestions/ideas and implement any worthwhile ideas or changes.
Have an existing volunteer call the new recruit before the first encounter to casually chat about different aspects of the organization and people involved.	When giving an assignment, be sure to let the volunteer know who they need to go to for questions and any budget or program approvals.	Include the volunteer in committee meetings, planning sessions or informal conversations about the organizational goals or future projects.
ALWAYS listen to a new volunteer’s suggestions and ideas. Treat the volunteer as a valuable member of a team.	If giving a complicated assignment to the volunteer, take the time to list steps and procedures.	Ascertain personal goals of new volunteers in order to align them with group goals.
Take a minute and show the new volunteer the informal aspects of the organization, i.e., where the drinking fountain and restrooms are, how to sign in, etc.	Handle conflict as soon as it arises and realize that conflict can contribute to growth and helps people understand formal and informal influences within an organization.	Occasionally invite the volunteers or a volunteer representative to board meetings or consider having a volunteer representative sit on the board as a liaison.
When making introductions, include something about the new volunteer, along with his/her name to help begin conversation.	Be sure the volunteer understands his/her role expectations.	Never underestimate the value of a volunteer on a team. They are often your best link to stakeholders and the pulse of the community.

## IDENTIFY POLICIES

Even though policies do not resolve all problems and eliminate all risks, policy development can reduce both risk and uncertainty within the organization. Policy usually is communicated in the CONTROL phase of the group cycle but tends to permeate all three phases. How much policy is in place is debatable and contingent on the general structural philosophy of the organization's culture. Some organizations deal with government entities and need tighter, more defined policies while others tend to be more flexible and dynamic. Your board will need to determine your policy "comfort zone" and balance that with risk management issues (see chapter 2). When making decisions about these important policies, consider the following questions/issues for your organization. Also, be open to new needs or changes. Don't be afraid to make necessary changes and welcome growth within the organization.

Issues to consider when making volunteer policy

- ▶ Criteria for volunteer roles
- ▶ Screening mechanisms for new volunteers (background check, references etc)
- ▶ Differentiation between staff /volunteer expense reimbursement
- ▶ How will reporting and evaluation be implemented?
- ▶ Committee structure and guidelines—which roles the board plays
- ▶ Risk management policy (see chapter 2)
- ▶ Conflict resolution policy
- ▶ Volunteer performance standards—can you fire a volunteer?
- ▶ Affirmative action statement for volunteers?
- ▶ Which out-of-pocket expenses for volunteers will be reimbursed?
- ▶ Criteria for other volunteer expenses such as training, etc.



It is important to remember that it is the role of the board to ensure that the above issues are discussed and addressed. If the organization has paid staff, it will be the role of that staff to implement the policy. If the board is also serving as a working board, then a board member or steering committee could be set up to handle policy implementation. When policy issues are discussed and implemented, the organization is better equipped to handle possible risks. Since most nonprofits are concerned about risk management, chapter 2 will outline additional risk management considerations.

